

Chester County Horticultural Hall
(now Chester County Historical Society)
225 North High Street
West Chester
Chester County
Pennsylvania

HABS No. PA-1121

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PHOTOGRAPHS
WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

Historic American Buildings Survey
Office of Archeology and Historic Preservation
National Park Service
801 19th Street, N.W.
Washington, D. C. 20006

CHESTER COUNTY HORTICULTURAL HALL
(now Chester County Historical Society)

Location: 225 North High Street, West Chester, Chester County, Pennsylvania.

Present Owner: Chester County Historical Society.

Present Occupant: Owner.

Statement of Significance: This unusual building, originally erected for a horticultural society but later used as a town meeting hall, exhibition space, theater and historical society, was the last building in West Chester to be designed by Thomas U. Walter.

PART I. HISTORICAL INFORMATION

A. Physical History:

1. Original and subsequent owners: Chester County Horticultural Society was the first owner. In 1873 it was sold at a sheriff's sale to Uriah H. Painter, who owned it at his death in 1900. His widow, Linda A. Painter, inherited it. In 1904 she gave it to the Chester County Historical Society, with the G.A.R. having a life interest as long as the local post was in existence.
2. Date of erection: 1848.
3. Architect: Thomas U. Walter.
4. Builder, suppliers etc.: Unknown except for Thomas Darlington, mason. Included under Part I, C of this report is a copy of accounts from his record book (original in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pennsylvania).
5. Original plans, construction etc.: Original plans of Walter have not been found. The building consisted of a large exhibition main floor with a large basement.
6. Alterations and additions:
 - 1872- gallery hung from the rafters across the west front and north and south sides of the main room. Extension in the rear for a stage and dressing room and the roof raised.
 - 1880- old benches removed and chairs put in.
 - 1882- fire escapes put in, two on each of north and south

- sides, one from balcony and one from first floor.
- 1883- ticket office changed.
 - 1885- an outside two-story addition to the northwest of main building added to house ticket office and stairs to balcony. Electric lights installed.
 - 1894- stage enlarged.
 - c.1930- balcony removed.
 - 1937- old stage removed and modern fireproof library etc. added by the Chester County Historical Society, Price and Walton, Philadelphia, the architects.
 - 1942- the new addition finished and occupied.

7. Important old views and references:

- a. Old views: Daily Graphic, New York, N.Y., for November 3, 1879.

In the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., is a collection of interior and exterior photographs from about 1870. The oldest one seems to have been taken immediately after the balcony was added in 1870. The entrance to the northwest of the main building that was erected in 1885 and torn down before 1904 is also pictured, as are the fireplaces and the stage and wings in their various sizes.

- b. References: All to be found in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., unless otherwise noted.

Lindsay, G. Carroll. Athens on High Street--The Architectural works of Thomas U. Walter in West Chester, Pennsylvania. Typed thesis in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts, University of Delaware, 1955.

Copy is in the University Library, Newark, Del.

Futhey, J. Smith and Cope, Gilbert. History of Chester County, Pennsylvania. Philadelphia, Pa.: Louis H. Everts, 1881.

Classified printed and manuscript files in the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., under headings: West Chester, Organizations - G.A.R.; Organizations - Chester County Horticultural Society; Organizations - Chester County Historical Society.

MacElree, Wilmer W. Brief Historical Sketch. West Chester, 1943.

B. Historical Events Connected with the Structure:

The Chester County Horticultural Society was founded in 1845

and incorporated in 1848, the year their exhibition hall was erected, the last work of Thomas U. Walter in West Chester. It is the second building in the country erected for such purposes. Besides the exhibitions of the society, the place became the town meeting hall and from 1850 onwards hundreds of men and women in every field lectured here; Horace Greeley, Lucretia Mott, Sojourner Truth, Ralph Waldo Emerson and scores of others. Nearly all the town's church, school and larger social events were held there. After being purchased by Uriah H. Painter it attracted an excellent group of road shows. He built the Lafayette Theatre in Washington, D. C., and managing the two theatres gave West Chester many attractions that it would not otherwise have had. The stage and wings were among the largest of any country theatre at the time. Painter was a close friend and backer of Edison, and electric light was introduced here very early. The main chandelier was afterwards removed to the Senate in Washington, D. C. A very large file of events, by date, is maintained at the Chester County Historical Society, West Chester, Pa., giving newspaper accounts of all that took place in the building from 1848 onwards.

C. Supplemental Material:

1. "HORTICULTURAL HALL. A meeting of the Chester County Horticultural Society, will be held next Saturday, 15th inst., at 2 o'clock, P.M., in the Cabinet, to concert measures for the erection of a Hall."

American Republican, West Chester, Pa., January 11, 1848.

2. HORTICULTURE.

"A stated meeting of the Chester county Horticultural Society, was held in the Cabinet, on Saturday last, and we are happy to state that it is in flourishing anticipation of successful experiment. A considerable amount of money has been subscribed, and committees appointed to enquire into the cost and report plans for erecting a spacious building for the accommodation of the monthly and annual exhibitions of the Society. They design, we understand to erect a building for useful purposes, that will afford accommodation to the various lectures, audience, etc. that may require a larger and more convenient building than the Cabinet. We hope they may succeed."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., March 21, 1848.

3. NOTICE.

"MEMBERS and others entitled to tickets to the Horticultural Exhibition are requested to call for the same, during the present week, upon Isaac Pyle, Secretary."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., September 4, 1849.

4.	"1848	John T. Haines	Dr.	
		Horticultural Hall		Dol Cts
	Oct. 7	To 51-1/2 days at 1.75		90.12-1/2
		" 537-1/2 " " 1.62-1/2		873.84
		" 44-1/2 " " 1.18-3/4		52.84
		" 176-3/4 " " 1.12-1/2		198.83-3/4
		Interest		7.05
				<u>\$1222.69-1/4</u>

	"1848	Contra	Cr.	
	July 15	By Cash		20.00
	22	" "		100.00
	29	" "		125.00
	Aug. 5	" "		150.00
	12	" "		105.00
	19	" "		95.00
	26	" "		150.00
	Jan. 8	By Cash of Ziba Pyle		
	"1849	Trea. of Horticultural Hall		250.00
	23	By Cash		209.45
		By Certificate of Loan		18.24
				<u>\$1222.69-1/4</u>

From Account Book of Thomas Darlington, Mason. Original manuscript in the Chester County Historical Society.

5. "IMPROVEMENT. - The Horticultural Hall is being remodeled and thoroughly repaired. The present management expect to spend several thousand dollars on the contemplated improvements, and when completed no doubt it will present a very creditable appearance."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., January 10, 1870.

6. "HORTICULTURAL HALL. - Mr. C. Frame, a few days ago, finished raising from the foundation, a large warehouse in Middletown, Pa. He is now engaged in raising the roof on the Horticultural Hall. It will be raised about five feet."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., January 17, 1870.

7. "HORTICULTURAL HALL. - The owners of the Horticultural Hall, West Chester, have determined upon remodelling and improvement of the building: the floor, is to be raised and made more substantial, and a gallery extending from the front around the sides half the depth of the building is to be erected at once, while an extension to the rear is to be added for staging and dressing rooms. Improvement in the mode of heating the Hall has also been decided upon. Indeed the effort is intended to make a hall for lectures and other amusements suitable to the wants of the place. The undertakers will have this advantage, they will find it a hard matter to spoil the building."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., November 5, 1870.7

8. "The Horticultural Hall. - After standing as it was built for nearly a quarter of a century, the Horticultural Hall at West Chester has been completely modernized. The floor and roof have been raised six feet, so that it is now a really imposing structure and an ornament to the borough. Its seating capacity has been increased over three hundred by a new gallery running around the Hall. The stage has been fitted out with a set of scenery for theatrical purposes; it and the drop curtain are the handiwork of Prof. Seavy, a New York artist, who painted Beale's Panorama which has several times been exhibited here. Two commodious rooms in the rear of the stage, for committee or retiring rooms, complete the outfit which, as Roberts, the tragedian (who has just been giving a series of standard plays) says, is now one of the finest and best fitted for public requirements of any Hall in the State outside of the large cities."

The Village Record, West Chester, Pa., May 6, 1871.7

9. BUILDING RAISING.

"If there is any job of Building Raising in the neighborhood, that nobody will undertake, and everybody prophesies will tumble down, as they did of the Horticultural Hall roof, let them call on the subscriber, and let him try the job.

CLINTON FRAME."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., March 25, 1871.7

10. "BUILDING MOVING. - Mr. C. Frame, of this borough is the most successful building raiser we hear of. Some few weeks ago he raised the roof of the Horticultural Hall. Everybody said it would be a failure - it would fall - it would be twisted, etc., but when Clint got his screws set up it

went gradually to the height of about six feet, and not a twist or crack about it."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., March 25, 1871.]

11. "DRAMATIC COMPANY. - The Horticultural Hall, in this Borough, after being closed nearly all winter, has been again opened for public exhibitions. Two nights last week the Presbyterian choir gave concerts and tableaux to appreciative audiences. Since then the stage has been cleared and drop curtains put up, and very handsome scenery arranged in the most approved style. This is a new feature in the Hall indeed, a new thing in West Chester. Heretofore all plays requiring a change of scenery could be but imperfectly represented on account of the absence of appropriate apparatus. Hereafter this will not be the case. In the rear of the hall an additional building has been erected, which has been divided into two large and airy dressing or green rooms communicating immediately with the rear part of the stage. Indeed all the paraphernalia of a theatre has been provided for the benefit of actors. Four large private boxes have been erected and properly fitted up, for the gratification of those who choose to be more exclusive in their attendance. A large number of new and improved seats have also been placed in the gallery, and new seats will be provided for the main body of the building. The gallery affords room for the accommodation of a large additional number of persons. The hall is heated from large furnaces in the cellar, and the ante-rooms each side of the entrance are dispensed with, thus largely increasing the capacity of the hall. Outside, the building is much improved in appearance. The six or eight feet added to its height, takes away its former 'squatty' appearance, and it is now really a fine building. The great large windows still extend to the floor, affording ready and safe egress to the people inside in case of accident."

Jeffersonian, West Chester, Pa., May 6, 1871.]

12. HORTICULTURAL HALL.
SEATS 1,200.
WEST CHESTER, PENN.

"Population about 7,000. Twenty-six miles, by rail, from Philadelphia. RECONSTRUCTED WITH GALLERY AND STAGE; ELEGANT SCENERY AND DROP CURTAIN BY PROF. SEAVEY: two large dressing rooms, with rear entrance. Just opened. Only large hall in the town to rent. First class shows are well patronized. apply to G. McCARTNEY
Janitor."

New York Clipper, New York City, New York, May 13, 1871.

13. "A CREDITABLE IMPROVEMENT. - The managers of our Horticultural Hall have recently erected a lobby addition to the entrance, which effectually shuts out the 'cold chilly blasts of December.' Our good people who have heretofore shrunk from visiting this hall owing to the cold blasts which were permitted to enter without opposition, will be happy to learn of this important improvement."

Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., January 4, 1872.

14. SHERIFF'S SALE OF REAL ESTATE.

"By virtue of a writ of Lev. Fa. Sur. Mech. Lien, to me directed, will be sold at Public Sale on MONDAY, MARCH 17th, A.D. 1873, at the Court House, in the borough of WEST CHESTER, Chester County, Pennsylvania, between the hours of 10 o'clock a.m. and 12m., the following described Real Estate, to wit: All that certain Lot or Piece of ground situate on the East side of High street, between Chestnut and Washington streets, in the Borough of West Chester, Chester county, Pa., being about 65 feet in front on High Street, and extending back of that width about 153 feet to an alley, containing about 9945 Feet of Land, more or less, with the appurtenances. The improvements are a one story building, having a front of about 65 feet and a depth of about 145 feet, and a one story rear building about 14 feet deep, known as the Chester County HORTICULTURAL HALL. This is a large Hall building with gallery and large stage, suitable for entertainments of any description.

"Seized and taken in execution as the property of 'The Chester County Horticultural Society,' and to be sold by
DAVIS GILL, Sheriff.

Sheriff's Office, West Chester, February 19, 1873.

N.B.- \$100 of the purchase money must be paid at the time and place of sale, and satisfactory security given for the payment of the balance thereof to the Sheriff on or before the last Monday in April 1873.

D. G. Sheriff."

The American Republican, West Chester, Pa., February 25, 1873.

15. "-A coat of blue calcimine is being put on the walls and ceiling of Horticultural Hall. The building is otherwise being improved."

Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., September 1, 1880.

16. "Chairs for Horticultural Hall.- A car load of chairs were received yesterday which are to take the place of the old wooden benches in Horticultural Hall. They are numbered and provided with spring backs and bottoms."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., September 8, 1880./

17. "Fire Escapes.- The managers of Horticultural Hall are now making an improvement to the building for which their patrons will be truly thankful. It consists of four pairs of stairs, two on each side, which will answer the double purpose of fire escapes, and for emptying the hall quickly when crowded. The two first ones lead to the gallery, and the two back ones to the first floor."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., July 25, 1882./

18. "Horticultural Hall to be Improved.- The proprietors of Horticultural Hall are making arrangements to add considerable improvement to that building, the work to be commenced in a few days. Among the alterations to be made is the doing away with the inside projection now at the door and running the benches back to the front wall. This will necessitate the removal of the ticket office from its present position, and it will be arranged on the outside of the building entirely. This alteration will increase the seating capacity of the hall very much."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., October 24, 1883./

19. "The Opening.- The West Chester Cornet Band opened its new roller skating rink in Horticultural Hall Friday evening under very flattering auspices. The new floor was as smooth as glass and the newly-painted and papered walls were favorably commented upon by the two hundred persons present. The members of the band in full uniform flitted about during the evening doing what they could to make their patrons feel at home and enjoy themselves. The Coatesville Cornet Band came down and gave their West Chester brethren a house-warming. There were seventeen of them, and at eleven o'clock after they had performed several beautiful airs and tried the skates awhile they started on the return trip homeward in a large sleigh. During the evening a barrel race was won by Masters Hemphill and Harlan and the hurdle race by Masters Heck and Strickland. The new malleable skates were much admired."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., February 21, 1885./

20. "Horticultural Hall. - Workmen are still engaged on the tower U.H. Painter is building at the northwest corner of Horticultural Hall from plans furnished by E. F. Bertollette, of Phoenixville, which were some time ago fully described in the columns of the LOCAL NEWS. On Wednesday Mr. Painter received a modification of the plan, which he has adopted. This plan changes greatly the external appearance of the building, making one door eight feet wide instead of two doors four feet each, while the second story will be decorated with one triple window instead of single ones as in the former plans. The shape of the roof has also been changed. The whole will look very neat and pretty. The present entrance door will be closed except at the end of an entertainment, when it will be opened to aid in emptying the hall quickly. The internal arrangement of the tower and vestibule will not be materially altered from our former description, with the exception that there will be two sets of swinging doors before entering the auditorium, which will completely prevent any sudden or severe drafts of wind blowing on those seated in the hall. Mr. Painter tells us that he will have the whole completed and in readiness for the Teachers' Institute. He has also ordered one hundred additional folding chairs to fill the space allowed by these changes in the building."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., September 10, 1885./

21. "The brick work of the tower now being erected at the northwest corner of Horticultural Hall, West Chester, was completed on Wednesday afternoon. Carpenters are now at work laying floors in the first and second stories of the building and also putting on the rafters for the roof. The tower is 17 feet square and 35 feet high to the square. The latter will be run up from the four corners to a peak and covered with shingles painted red. At the east side of this tower there will be a flight of stairs that will lead into the northwest corner of the second story. About midway of the lower room there will be a partition with swinging doors, while another door of the same kind will be placed in the doorway leading from the tower into the main audience room of the building. This, it is thought, will effectually prevent the draughts of air which were so objectionable heretofore. The ticket office will be placed under the stairway in the tower. It is so arranged that one person will be able to take the tickets for both the main room and the gallery. Mr. Painter has had the hall wired for a large number of electric lights around the sides of the main audience room, also for footlights, and during the holding of the Teachers' Institute will have, in addition to the above, a large chandelier hanging a short distance from the stage."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., October 1, 1885.7

22. "The chandelier at Horticultural Hall, West Chester, leaves today to take up its position in the Senate of the United States."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., January 7, 1885.7

23. "Next week the work of tearing out and rebuilding the rear portion of the Opera House will commence in earnest, the bricklayers having been notified to go to work at that time. A large and commodious stage is to be erected, in the rear of which will be several dressing and waiting rooms."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., May 5, 1894.7

24. "-Horticultural Hall, it is said, will seat 1300 people."

/Daily Local News, West Chester, Pa., October 21, 1885.7

PART II. ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A. General Statement:

1. Architectural character: This last work of Thomas U. Walter in West Chester has been modified several times in order to serve varied functions, and although this has always been an important community building, it is not outstanding architecturally.
2. Condition of fabric: Good, as to the 1848 building. Excellent, as to the 1942 addition.

B. Description of Exterior:

1. Over-all dimensions: Original building c. 45 feet by 75 feet; first stage c. 14 feet deep; 1942 wing c. 50 feet by 65 feet.
2. Foundations: Stone and brick.
3. Wall construction: Stone and brick in original building; concrete block in 1942 addition. The west front wall is of Serpentine stone from a local quarry. The side walls, north and south, are of brick covered with mastic. East wall is entirely new, a part of the 1942 fireproof addition.
4. Chimneys: Two on south side - original.

5. Openings:

- a. Doorways and doors: Doorway on west front original. All window openings on the north and south sides have been enlarged.
- b. Windows and shutters: All window openings on the north and south sides have been enlarged.

6. Roof:

- a. Shape, covering: Low pitch, gable roof covered with tin. 1942 wing - steep pitch, gable with fireproof shingles.
- b. Cornice, eaves: Probably original.
- c. Dormers: None.

C. Description of Interior:

- 1. Floor plans: None of Walter's plans for this building are known. The building had just the one large exhibition room to start with, and basement under all. The rear section was added in 1870 and greatly enlarged in 1894. The 1848 building consists of one story and basement; the 1942 addition has two-and-one-half stories.
- 2. Stairways: None in the original building, except possibly inside steps to basement which have not survived.
- 3. Flooring: Flooring has always been wooden. Present one is that laid in 1885 for the roller skating rink.
- 4. Wall and ceiling finish: Plaster.
- 5. Doorways and doors: Door in west front seems to be original; it is heavily studded.
- 6. Trim: Nothing original left.
- 7. Hardware: Nothing original left.
- 8. Lighting: Nothing original left. Gas was put in about 1852 or shortly thereafter and electricity in 1885.
- 9. Heating: Had hot air heaters originally. Steam from a town central plant at present.

D. Site:

1. General setting and orientation: Faces west on High Street (Route 100); bound on south by a small public street; extends to east as far as the lot. Grass plot to the north for over half a century, but now only a few feet from the Church of Christ Scientist, the first chartered in Pennsylvania.
2. Landscaping, gardens, etc.: Small grass plot in front, with a cryptomeria on either side of entrance steps.

Prepared by Bart Anderson
Curator
Chester County Historical Society
National Park Service
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